

Challenges of Economic Data Collection During a Pandemic

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Pre-Pandemic State

- The National Processing Center (NPC) in Jeffersonville, IN performs the predominant support services for Econ's data collection operations (supports approximately 42 Econ programs)
- Heavy reliance on mail operations with forms and letters sent to business respondents from NPC
- Mail schedules had built in time to print and assemble based on size and complexity of mailing
- Certified mailings were conducted for many surveys as a best practice to drive in response for delinquent respondents late in the collection cycle

Pre-Pandemic State

- Incoming and outgoing telephone operations were conducted solely on site at NPC
- HQ staff traveled to NPC to perform in-person training to various units for each survey program
- Clerical operations for check-in, keying, Undeliverable As Addressed (UAA) research & updates, and handling of respondent email requests were part of normal NPC operations and conducted on a flow basis by onsite staff
- Outbound email operations were used primarily for follow-up operations with no survey contact sharing between surveys

State of Operations

- The start of the pandemic in mid-March 2020 saw NPC staff mandated to stay home or report onsite in a very limited fashion
- NPC Staff were not Telework ready
 - Many jobs were not conducive to working remotely
 - Did not have the proper equipment to support Telework
- HQ staff were now on 100% Telework

Mail Operations: Mitigation Strategies

- Increased use of email
- With limited staff onsite at NPC starting in early May 2020:
 - Prioritized Indicator Surveys
 - Implemented more Pressure Sealed mailings
 - Implemented automated Priority Mailing
 - Daily monitoring and prioritizing of mail activities

Respondent Communication Support: Mitigation Strategies

- All incoming calls were sent to voicemail
 - HQ support for voicemails and secure email messaging
 - Survey Analysts, Collection staff, Full Service Account Management (FSAM)
- Maintained outbound phone support for Indicator programs
 - Utilized same HQ staff as well as Administrative staff
 - Implemented Robo Calls
- Stood up full telework ready clerical staff at NPC
 - Virtual training
 - Use of common systems to increase staff available
 - Daily meetings to re-evaluate and re-prioritize work with evolving resources

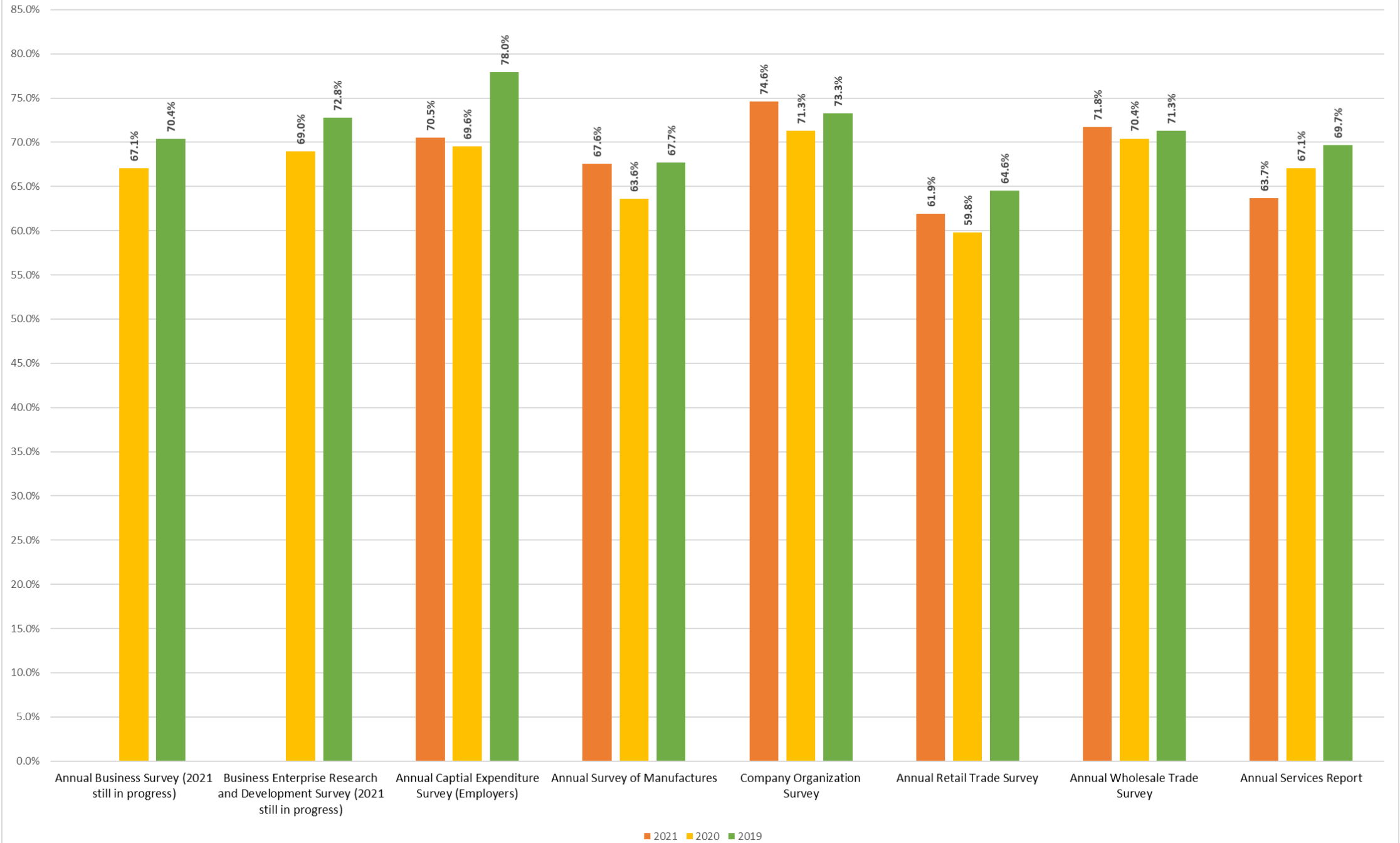
Clerical Operations: Mitigation Strategies

- Automated programs to update UAA addresses rather than performing research
- With limited staff on site in early May of 2020:
 - Updated UAA & correspondence procedures to stop shipments to HQ and scan for electronic review when necessary
 - Prioritized research and form keying operations

Impact on Businesses

- Respondents were not physically in office to retrieve mail
- Left more voicemails
- Some respondents working from home with no access to records needed to complete surveys
- Furloughs, layoffs and closures

Annual Response Rates



Indicator Impacts

- No delays in the release of the Economic Indicator Programs during the pandemic
- Indicator programs saw small percentage changes in response rates during the pandemic, yet the greater impact was on the data received
 - Due to the shutdown orders, the value of the sales and inventories data was impacted
- Indicators placed questions on the electronic reporting instrument in the remarks section to collect near real-time data on the impact
 - Prior to the inception of the Small Business Pulse Survey, this was the first insight on the impact of the pandemic

Expansion of Email

- Increase in Email Operations as the predominant collection mode
 - HQ performed email research operations for many cases previously only contacted by mail
 - Surveys began to share email addresses
 - Began to use historic and secondary contact for email follow ups
 - Implemented initial email collection activities
 - Allowed us to perform the Small Business Pulse survey - 1 million respondents sent emails every 9 weeks resulting in 25% response

Operational Challenges to Email Expansion

- Barriers to delivery
 - Spam/junk mail
 - Company/ISP restrictions
 - Respondent system limitations and throttling
- Undeliverable and 'bounce backs'
- HTML coding/Browser formatting
- Email overload or burden & legitimacy
- Management of contact and organizational changes

Benefits that Arose During Pandemic

- Expansion of email operations
- Survey collection adjustments became permanent such as Pressure Sealed mailings, Priority mailings, Robo Calls and removal of some paper operations
- Move towards Adaptive Collection
- Stood up virtual training between HQ and NPC for clerical and phones support operations
- NPC became TW ready which also opens up the door to new opportunities

Questions for the Committee

- How do we understand respondent limitations and adapt our practices for email expansion?
- How do we develop a more robust contact management and database strategy to be more adaptive with collection?
- How do we adapt our collection methods to meet respondents' challenges with ever changing workplace environments?

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